

ALL THIS HAPPINESS

Sara Lippmann

The apologies start at the townhouse door. He is late. Sorry, the buses. He should have built in allowances for Sunday service schedules, but this is not his usual gig. He is not a magician. He is a clown. A sick clown, he does not perform at happy occasions but for the diseased and dying—not children with sallow skin and cartoon divider curtains (those jobs being highly competitive)—rather for the elderly, at nursing homes where everyone is too blitzed, too lost in their spittle of drool, in the far reaches of their own memories, to notice him.

He shuffles sideways through the narrow entrance to avoid snagging his props, but they catch him up anyway: the broom, the bottomless chair, the boombox all clang against him. I don't have it all streamlined, he says, shaking autumn leaves pasted to his oversized shoes like the drippy strips of paper mâché he wrapped around salad dressing bottles in second grade.

Remember, he wants to say, the way Ms. Potts pushed our gluey fists into that bucket of gray water?

Instead he says: "I am sorry."

Jonah Holloman's six-year-old birthday is his first.

"Max Pincus, my lifesaver!" Jenny Matz, now Holloman, greets him in the doorway. She throws her long, freckled arms around him. He feels stunned, feels the receding remains of his dark hair tuft up from the electricity of her touch; although it isn't a surprise. This was her house. It was she who had called him last night, after her parents had chatted up his parents at the civic association's annual wine tasting party, she who had begged him to come. Already she killed him, looking the same twenty years later: shiny, honey-streaked mane pulled back in a ponytail, as if fresh from a field hockey match. Same statuesque frame impervious to the tugs of childbirth, same standard issue of jeans and white T-shirt, only the ensemble seemed more pulled together on Jenny than on his wife, Meredith—crisp, brighter, fancier. Sure, there were slight changes. Her nails, he noticed, were no longer gnashed to athletic nubs but oval-shaped, glossed in a pink marshmallow. Color accented her cheeks, tighter, less generous, the color deliberate, more aggressive than the flush of adolescence, closer to war paint. She wore a weaponry of rings.

Max admits it is good to see her.

“Look at you! I’m so glad you could make it! And on such short notice!”

Her voice, a husky gush, sucks him back to eleventh grade health class where she sat two desks behind his snickering at the sight of Ms. Falco’s visual map of ovaries and fallopian tubes chalked over her red terrycloth gym shorts. He blinks. Ms. Falco’s class was the last time the three of them—Max, Jenny, Angie Bell—had been together. The blinking was a tic that irritated Meredith when they first started dating but which now she either ignores or no longer notices, her mind preoccupied, his muscle spasms unconscious, most of the time. He blinks as reassurance, like a baby mastering object permanence, another milestone his daughter Una will likely never reach. He tries to act normal, whatever that is. This is Jenny, after all. What they’ve done, who they’ve become, the muzzy rest is irrelevant. Right now, she needs him, and it feels good to be of use.

“*Alakhazam!*” He blurts, then colors at the break of her smile.

Like morning show anchors or pop stars, Jenny is one of those people whose radiance casts a candied aura. Smiles like hers might as well be accompanied by violins and doves. It has taken Max painful years to realize they amount to nothing, her charm indiscriminate, cast like pollen upon hoping, hopeful, hopeless youth. And yet the pattern proves irresistible—she’d called, and he’d jumped to it.

“Come in, come in,” she urges. With the exception of a few holiday breaks, they haven’t seen each other since high school—a wave from their childhood street, Jenny’s other hand tucked in the back pocket of a new Dartmouth boyfriend each semester. Long after she bounced up the stairs and into her parents’ split-level with her beau, he’d stand on his parents’ driveway, protective goggles digging into his sinuses, leaf blower in hand, lowered between his knees, the motor still alive, whirring, a dull, empty threat.

“Open sesame,” he mumbles, addressing the floor.

She reaches, but his hands are so full that he tumbles into her, bulky as a trash bin, unable to return the embrace. The heavy front door slams behind him, bumping the coat rack, which tips a banana leaf plant, and sends the party hats stacked on the banister flying.

“Forgive me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jenny dismisses it, backing deeper into the entranceway to make room for him. She blames the ferocious cross-breeze, a result of her grandly renovated four-story brownstone. “What matters is...you’re here.” Fenced in the foyer, radiator on one wall, brushed steel sideboard on the other, Max feels as though the space were caving in, a *Star Wars* in the compactor moment, he is stepping on puffy coats, children’s rubbery clogs, what feels like living things crunching beneath his feet,

backpacks, stroller shields, umbrellas he doesn't want to ruin, so he rises onto his toes with all his baggage.

"Right this way," Jenny says with a glimmering hand, rainbows shooting from her diamonds. It is how he imagines she speaks to the help, which is what he is.

"Presto change-o!"

He is only trying to inhabit the role she'd set out for him, yet her wince is visible. Familiar. This is how things went for Max: everything he did or said came out wrong. Nothing could ever be taken back. "Your wish is my command."

His entire apartment could fit inside the dining room they pass on the right, polished walnut table centered beneath a starburst chandelier and arranged with Lucite napkin holders and candle sticks as if a formal party might spontaneously erupt. On his left is the media room, a television stretching the length of a wall, the others lined in white couches. How did one raise children among white couches? Where were they all, anyway? The place felt eerily quiet. He studies her, the keen line of her back, hug of her jeans, as she walks into her white lacquered kitchen. It's hard to believe a house of this size exists in the city. Whatever he read about Wall Street rule had remained an abstraction until now, worlds away from his three-story walk-up in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

“Alla Peanut Butter sandwiches!”

Jenny stops, turns. “You don’t have to do that.”

“What?”

“Sesame Street. Hoolie Kahoolie.”

Max starts another apology, but she silences him with a squeeze on his shoulder.

“Try so hard.”

“Jenny—” he starts, feeling the heat stamp his neck.

“Save it for downstairs,” she says, “It’s just me, here. You can be yourself.”

“Of course,” he manages, “Jenny.” As if it was simple.

Cherry Lane had been a typical, tree-lined street in a post-war subdivision of suburban New Jersey, pre-fab and uniform, an aesthetic step up from Levittown, or so its residents liked to think. Schools were desirable and neighbors like-minded, so much so that local mothers forged their own baby group/knitting circle/casserole club. That’s how their mothers became friends. Jenny and Max rolled around in crocheted blankets together, they spit up on each other’s burp cloths, rattled the plastic walls of the playpen together, swapped binkies; easily, they could have sucked each other’s thumbs.

When Angie moved there in '75, Max and Jenny had just begun first grade. Angie looked like everyone else—well-proportioned, apple-cheeked; she could have been the glossy face on a toy box. The only physical flag presented itself in the perpetual sludge that pooled in the corners of her mouth, a mix of peanut butter crackers and white bread. On the way home from school, backpack thumping, she ran after Max and Jenny, swatting herself in the face with her braids. But her golden hair was fashioned in grosgrain bows and her playroom was stocked high with shiny gadgets and after school snacks consisted of sundaes and root beer floats so, regardless of any differences, Angie Bell was in. If anyone were to connect the dots, their houses formed a triangle. They called themselves “The Cherry Gang.”

Max is sweating already. Beneath the recessed lighting in the Holloman kitchen, he feels the slow slide of droplets from his temples, as if his face were a window in the rain from which he was looking out, watching Jenny. Her face collapses the dam of memory. Their shared history has taken root inside him all these years, even more than his wedding day or his daughter's birth.

“Can I take that?” Jenny motions to his windbreaker. Max shakes his head, nylon sticking to him like an old gum wrapper.

“Do you want anything?”

“I had a bowl of cream of wheat this morning,” he says then self-corrects. “I’m okay.”

They are standing so close that he can see the faint scar on her chin from the time she’d slipped from Angie Bell’s bunk bed ladder during a game of hide-and-seek. They were seven at the time, and blood burst from everywhere, nose, chin, lip, and even though it was Jenny’s body, Jenny’s injury, he would have fainted had she not taken his hand. “Looks worse than it is,” she assured him, tickling his fist until it relaxed. “Always does when you land close to the surface.” He can smell the same cucumber soap she’d always used. But her light eyes are webbed with blood vessels, and now he smells something else in the air, deeper, sour, like pickles sitting on the counter for too long.

Maybe it is him.

That day they’d locked Angie out of her own bedroom, ostensibly for the game, but really because they could get away with any particular cruelty. Popping heads off dolls, scribbling on the rug in permanent marker, chewing the blue and pink plastic stand-ins for people in the board game of LIFE to soggy bits, dangling dollar goldfish out of bowls—their behavior bound them in secrecy. Angie never tattled but obeyed, as if engaged in a whip-cracking game of *Mother May I*. Had her parents suspected, they never said anything; Angie, finally, fit in. Her walls were powder blue, decaled with

symmetrical clouds. At the sound of Jenny's fall, Angie came running, banging at the door, chocolate pudding pops melting down her wrists.

"You're perfect," Jenny says.

She winks, but on a forty-four-year-old who, upon closer inspection, may recently have had cosmetic injections, it does not deliver the desired effect. Not that he is one to talk. Max is wearing heart suspenders and polka dot pants, his tie-dyed t-shirt hanging loose as a parachute.

"I didn't have much time to prepare."

"Well, you do, Max. You look great."

"I'm no longer fat."

"Honestly."

Jenny looks away, her ponytail lulling him like his daughter's mobile, as she reaches into a cabinet for a highball, pours herself something, then dips into the fridge for a handful of ice cubes, and takes a long, steady sip. When she returns to him, her smile is wide enough to blanket any discomfort.

"Sure I can't entice you?" She shakes her glass, her eyes shiny. "A party is a party." It is something their mothers would have said. Again, she moves toward him, but she is a film, a hologram Max feels certain he could punch a hand through. Again, he recoils.

"Not even for old time's sake?"

Old time's sake?

"I've eaten." His voice is flat. "Thank you."

Jenny swallows. The bottom of the glass functions as a magnifier, making her teeth grotesque. She plunks down her drink.

"Well, then." She tightens her hair. "Let me introduce you to Jonah. He's terrific. You're going to love him. Everyone is waiting. We already sang but saved you a piece of cake. You are going to be great, great."

What was with the repetition?

Max was never great. Was he ever good? Had he ever been decent, promising, adequate, or fine? In elementary school, maybe, he'd been harmless and round in the middle, eager to please. On Valentine's Day, he received the standard drugstore cards with the rest of the class, only his were absent of lollipops and candy hearts beseeching BE MINE, an absence that conveyed its own message. But for all his likability, he failed to excel at any one thing, not sports or science or trombone, and his shoelaces were always a seasonal trend behind, so when the three local grammar schools merged for sixth grade, it was no longer sufficient to be simply a good-natured kid.

Jenny Matz catapulted to fame by striking the puberty jackpot while Angie was held back in special-ed. Max sold candy bars in the bathroom. They were the Cherry Gang no more. "Part of life," his older sister, Elena,

told him. “Shit happens. Nothing lasts. Plus, don’t kid yourself, Max-a-million, you were only neighbors.”

Soon, Max was skipping school, vandalizing property (*lobotomist*, he scratched on the door to the principal’s office), and decapitating the Glassmans’ mailbox during a reckless sledding expedition. Students laughed. His grades plunged. Max couldn’t so much as pick his nose without getting busted. Actions came with consequences. There were so many: underage arrests, revoked licenses, bedpans dumped as part of community service. Christened class clown by the annual yearbook staff, he performed to reputation, with a snub to his parents, for whom a prestigious college sticker meant the world. After everything, he barely slipped into community college, back door and in-state, an auxiliary campus where his parents had known someone on the admissions committee.

“Follow me,” Jenny says.

They are off. Through her dizzying, expansive parlor floor, Max trails her, this room with antique pocket doors, that one with crown moldings, down another corridor, listening for signs of life. Despite her carriage, strong posture, and flawless curves, something is off. Her legs seem to have lost direction. Closing in behind her, he is seized by the knowledge that he could lift her up and snap those joints in two. Women his age seem either to

exaggerate their former selves or let themselves go, as if their bodies were balloons on strings. Meredith, one could say, has forgotten about herself in the last year, for good reason. But Jenny, my God, Jenny—

Jenny was talking so fast it was coming out slurry, as if she were the harried neurology resident on-call in a rush to debrief him on Una's latest turn, but it was only birthday protocol, children's names, who had which food allergy. ("Steer clear of eggs, milk, fish or nuts, got it?") Her back a wall between them, he cannot make out all of it. It does not matter. He feels the old swell of desire, mixed with the violence of disgust. Better not to see her face.

Midway down the flight of stairs portraits catch his eye, professional beach shots in black and white, children airborne like plastic bags, hair catching the breeze. Here are the Hollomans choreographed in linen, the husband's shirt open two more buttons than Max would ever consider, revealing a tight, waxed chest. Twin girls missing half a dozen teeth nestled in salt grass on the dunes, the boy, a muffin of freckles and curls. The images remind him of the anonymous inserts of picture frames sold in pharmacies, advertising: all this happiness could be yours. Jenny stops, too, and, for a minute, she watches him watch her family caught in time, preserved in high gloss finish.

"Don't your parents have a condo in Avalon?"

“Margate. They just laid new carpeting.” Max does not lift his eyes from the stills.

“Then I’ll give you the number of our photographer. Barbara told my mother you have children, too, right? Good for you, Max!”

She cheers him on like he’s a retriever with a stick in his jaw, assuring him that his mother had told her mother exactly nothing about his family last night over spanakopita and samplings of the latest Syrah.

“Still smells of old towels,” he says, not that he’s been down the Shore recently. His nose pressed to her wall art, Max feels like a pet, pushing against the outside of a screen door, tail wagging. “Cute kids.”

“Yeah, well,” she laughs, trails off.

“How is your sister?”

Elena lives on the West Coast and writes for soap operas. She is very successful. He says this on cue whenever prompted. She has two children, bright and well-rounded, and though he does not see them often, he receives regular blog updates.

“Elena?”

“Yes, Elena! I’d blanked.”

“She is fine.”

“And your parents?”

“They, too, are fine.” He sounds like an ESL zombie, stumbling through Spanish oral quizzes, stopping, recording, rewinding the tape: “Maria and Paco like to visit the beach. They sit in the café and eat churros. Check, please!” As rotten a student as he had been, he’d taught Angie the words to “La Cucaracha” in the tenth grade because she wasn’t permitted to take foreign language, required instead to spend half the day in resource room, romper room, as they called it. *Ya no puede caminar.*

Nothing, nobody was fine.

Some people took forever to die. Residents at the nursing home sucked their spoons long past their dignity. Every day, it seemed, the AARP published a new article on which co-enzymes and super foods could promise extended longevity. If she did not receive a necessary bone marrow transplant, his daughter, Una, would be dead within the year.

Her death was a certainty he found almost comforting, compared to the agony of her decline, waiting for a match. When Una’s seizures first started he and Meredith would spend nights mopping her forehead, making fresh compresses, pouring ice in the bath, running to the ER, unified in their parental front. Then, Meredith pushed Max to throw a fundraiser, as if twisted animal balloons could save his daughter. The turnout was abominable. Of course, no magic rabbit could be pulled from his hat. Now,

he hated watching Meredith drape her body over their daughter's crib, her eyes closed, her lips moving in her own silent spell, praying to whom he could not imagine.

“Are you going to stand there forever?” He'd cut through the dark, powerless, impatient, and Meredith would answer with song, rocking in the treetops, which hit him as an indictment. How can you not? Stand here, goddammit, watch over your child, forever is finite, do whatever it takes.

“Tuna, is it?” Jenny asks, losing her footing. “What an adorable, unique name.” She grips the banister. Max does not correct her. He does not say that sometimes he gathers stones for his daughter's gravestone, red pebbles from Coney Island, shale from Floyd Bennett Field, a bottle cap from the gutters along Nostrand Avenue. He does not mention the weight against his thighs, collected ruins begging at the seams of his pockets.

His parents had visited them in Bed-Stuy exactly once. Barbara and Cal would not remove their shoes. It was not their custom. They sat on the couch with Una in their arms and watched her shake, whimper like the cockatoo they'd run over by accident when Max was nine and his family was late for High Holiday services, the fateful intonation of the annual prayer, who by water, who by fire, before returning their granddaughter to her

rightful owners and reaching for hand sanitizer as if they'd just taken out the trash.

“Jeffrey is sorry he couldn't be here. He would have loved to meet you. He's heard so many things.”

What things?

“He's been traveling so much, you know.”

Max doesn't know.

“What things?”

Jenny tugs on his sleeve. Was that her breast mashed against his elbow? He searches her face for some sign of intimacy; to prove they are not strangers, but it is inscrutable and no longer distinct, her features running together in a smeary blend.

“Husbands,” she says. And here comes the smile. “Seriously, we'd have been royally screwed without you.”

Hard to believe, at first, but true: marriage lent new depth to solitude. In Bed-Stuy, Max and Meredith sat in dark rooms. Separate rooms. Three years into their union, Max sank into the upholstered rocker and flipped through stories, book lamp clipped onto thick volumes of fairy tales. Alone, he read *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*. The useless breastfeeding pillow hugged his waist like a life float. When the lovestruck soldier and ballerina were consumed by

flames, he wept in the dark, with no one but nine-month-old Una to hear him. Then he'd get up and fill the spot Meredith had occupied earlier when it had been her shift, cranking plush mobiles, adjusting oxygen straps, lost in song. He could barely make out the shape of his daughter's rigid body. His eyes failed to adjust. Where Meredith begged for time, all he wanted was mercy. Was that love? Grace? Selfishness or selflessness? His palm feeling around blindly for the rise of Una's tiny chest.

"What I mean," Jenny wobbles. He can hear the escalating mob downstairs. "Listen," she says, "in case I forget." Her hand cups his cheek. Here we go, Max thinks, breathing her in. Jenny will say it. Angie Bell welcomed the world from the back windshield of the late bus, but all Jenny's got is "thank you."

They owe each other nothing. In junior high, as Jenny—*I've got your number!*—rose to the top of the cheerleading pyramid, Max grew his hair and shredded his jean jacket until his fingernails blackened and clothes accumulated that mealy, masturbatory smell, the smell of disregard, highlighted by resin and pencil shavings. Perhaps a faint current ran between them. Nods in the hallway, space in the lunchroom line. In this way, he liked to think, they had each other's backs. Angie was a different story. By the time she caught up to high school, she had seaweed streaks in her hair. Max

found her along the butt-littered strip between the school's exit and the bus lane, her mouth full of upperclassmen. The following week, he pulled her from a house party, pedaled her home on his handlebars.

“Now how about we get this show on the road?”

Of the original group, his parents and Jenny's were the only ones left on Cherry Lane, but they no longer socialized much. After Angie, bad luck clung to the asphalt, the azalea bushes, rolled down the shared driveways until neighbors packed up and left. There was such frequent turnover that they lost track of names. Periodically, over the years, Max would hear reports. So and so left his wife in the supermarket checkout line, this one suffered a massive coronary, that one blew their savings on pipe dreams and high priced hookers in Atlantic City, Jerry Hart loved men and not women, as if you couldn't follow that ascot a mile away. Max's mother still walks to the edge of her driveway each morning, camel slippers and robe, to retrieve the daily papers.

“It would be a mitzvah,” his mother said on the phone last night after she'd volunteered him. “Jenny Matz was always such a *darling* girl.” His mother rarely called, his mother who spat three times every time Una's name was mentioned lest her fate be transmitted, was beseeching him to help out poor Jenny Matz, now Holloman. “Can you imagine the nerve, entertainment canceling the day before the party, plus that husband of hers

always on business?” Philandering, his mother suspected. “If nothing else, consider the child,” his mother was saying, when sure enough, Jenny beeped through. Max hedged, I’m not what you need, but Jenny was desperate, insistent, her voice rising. “Pretty please,” she said, “with sugar on top?” In the adjacent room Una was inconsolable; no bottle, pacifier (Meredith had stopped nursing when Una’s suck grew too weak) would soothe her. Max shut the bathroom door with his foot and in the windowless escape, heard Jenny’s last plea— “Everyone will love you” — and agreed.

“Izzy wizzy let’s get busy,” Max says, as he reaches the bottom of the stairs.

The crowd is restless. Two dozen first graders cracked out on cake are bouncing in the Holloman basement, boys and girls hurdle the furniture, hissing into bean bags and sliding down the slick pads of converted futons, giving each other Indian burns until someone cries mercy. Candy wrappers wink in the carpet.

“Who’s ready for a special surprise?” Jenny shouts. No one looks up.

She claps her hands like a schoolmarm. Parents go on talking, nodding, evening out the wheels of cheese.

“Ladies and gentleman! Boys and girls!” Jenny stretches her arms to her sides then over her head. A few mommies roll their eyes, lean in over snack bowls to whisper. Of course, Max thinks: everyone has problems.

“Introducing the one and only... Max the Magician!”

His props land with a thud.

Angie Bell liked to take her pants off in the basement. Angie Bell liked to remove her training bra, the kind sold at Strawbridge & Clothier, with snowy foam cups and sewn rosettes. Downstairs, boxed in wood paneling, she flashed her breasts, not yet round but vaguely triangular, as if they were unsure what shape to take. At 10, 12 her nipples shivered runty and red as newborn mice. After Jenny Matz went home for piano lessons, he stayed and fed Angie jelly beans, keeping the popcorn ones to himself. She let him play Atari and worm his fingers inside. In middle school, Atari became Sega and then Nintendo, so what of it? Until Angie started calling Max her boyfriend. That wasn't funny; Max would not be funny with a retard by his side. Why he felt such unwavering conviction, he does not remember, except that somehow, impossibly, he did it for Jenny. Jenny who took sudden interest in the rumor, scrawling on the bottom of his shoe “I thought I was your special,” and he fell for it. If Angie was so hot to be Max's steady

he would show her, which he did, right into her scented stash of Cabbage Patch kids.

Only Angie didn't seem to mind; Angie held his tubby ass and acted like her whole life depended on it, this moment, gone in seven seconds. "Good boy," Angie called him afterward, brushing a curl, which was partly true – he sure did not feel like a man.

He emerged from the Bell basement to Jenny. Jenny had orchestrated everything, Jenny who'd volunteered to keep an eye on Angie, Jenny upstairs on the Bells' tartan sofa with her *General Hospital* and Keds on the coffee table and cup of instant soup. Jenny cheering real slow: rah-rah-sis-boom-bah. Foolishly he'd hoped—what? That Jenny would be impressed? That time would revert, and life resume from where it'd once been, when awful things were the secret joy that bound them?

At school, Jenny ignored him. In Ms. Falco's health class, Angie blabbed about babies, *the smell of love is an indoor pool*, and Max marched out in anger; anger and hatred and shame. That Friday night in June, he rapped on Angie's window with a nervous concoction he'd fixed just in case she needed to bleed. In the basement she drank and coughed and dribbled and drank some more, and Bob Geldof was on TV cutting himself shaving, and Max didn't need to pretend to Angie he understood. After her stomach had been pumped she did not say a word. For a week or so, local networks parked

cameras on their lawns, but Max was never charged. There was no clear story. They were kids, after all. By September, the Bells had moved.

“Who’s ready for a terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad time?” Max starts, pulling and pinching his face like putty to mold a frown.

“Who wants to have zero fun at all?”

“Nooooo!” The partygoers holler.

He crosses his eyes. Sure enough, laughter follows.

This was what he does: makes people laugh for a living. It goes on like a switch. “To do magic, we need to speak magic. Who knows a magic word?”

The future stares back at him, and it is disconcerting: sticky chins, chocolate faces, lazy looks of entitlement. Children are licking their own snot, both scrunched together and scattered across the floor like a fresh litter of puppies unsure of where their bodies end and others begin.

“Abracadabra!”

“Hocus pocus!”

“Diddle dee docus!”

“So many smarty pants, so little time,” he nods, dipping into his bag of tricks. With his head bowed, hair unwashed and balding, save for that small island of black, the kids surround him. They take and they take: his top hat, his rabbit’s foot, his flip book of disappearing ink. Every one of his

belongings is swiped from his hand and floated back like a body over a mosh pit. A threesome of red foam balls, a plastic geranium that squirts ink. Toy handcuffs. He swats at them futilely with his colorful chain of knotted scarves, reminding himself to stay upbeat and light, this was a party and he was the jokester, the joker, the court jester—it was all in good fun.

Someone grabs the other end of the scarves in a tug of war.

“Okay, Dingoes. Three steps back! Can someone find me the birthday boy?”

“What’s in it for him?” This from the clenched jaw of the kid holding onto the rope’s other end.

“You must be Jonah!”

Max releases his grip. Jonah springs backward.

“And you must be that creep my mom told me about.” Jonah is wearing a purple graphic tee that reads HAVE CAKE AND EAT. Max takes a bow.

“Step right up, creeper at your service.”

“Didn’t know you’d be so muscled up.”

“Don’t believe everything you see, pal.”

“You’re supposed to be fat.”

“Life’s full of surprises.”

He glances at Jenny but sees only her mouth, a tunnel, dark pink like the ventricle to the model heart at the Franklin Institute they once hid inside on a school trip, the tumbler tilting toward it. She was not about to save him.

In his face, Max can smell Jonah's breakfast cereal.

"Do you love her?"

Max doesn't reply.

"If you love my mom so much, why don't you marry her?"

Jenny is elsewhere. Drinking and smiling and refilling her cup, drinking smiling, filling the cups of others, and Max doesn't know which is worse: to remember without remorse or to have no decent recollection.

"Guys, give this boy a leash."

A whoopee cushion sails at him. Max doffs it on his head like a beret. Playing the butt was second-nature. Physical comedy is where he always went when he had no place to go. Fat jiggles, you giggle, he used to say when he was stoned and shameless and spending another month in detention. He rips an armpit fart, pinches his nostrils. "Hey, birthday boy, bathroom's on your left."

Children squeal; parents—the one or two who hear him—look as if the air is actually foul.

"For my first trick," he waves his wand and it flops over, limp.

“I know that already! It’s a fake!”

“I haven’t done anything, goon dog,” he says, handing Jonah the wand. When it fails to behave, Jonah hurls it into a mirror propped against the wall, but the wand doesn’t shatter the glass.

“Nice manners, babe!” Max glances again at Jenny, Jonah does the same, but she does not pick up on it. A pair of unhappy tweens—the twin girls from the photos, Max thinks, now grown? —materialize from nowhere, silently pocket the prop, and retreat.

“Be cool, stay in school, or you’ll wind up a circus elephant like me,” he says, spraying Jonah with a water-gun designed to look like a boy taking a piss.

“Hit me! Hit me! Hit me!” Children cry.

“I thought you’d never ask.” He sprays the room.

“Don’t try this at home.” Max rolls a newspaper into a cone, pours a quart of milk into it, and wrings it out dry.

“That’s totally not real!”

“You tell him!” Jonah’s buddies echo. Max bops each one on the head with his toy microphone, hits the portable boom box. “*Real, shmeal, schlemiel!*” His hips gyrate to Latin disco music. This is the standard warm-up routine he performed for his nursing home audience, but here he feels like a

letch. Adults bury into their phones. Jenny is engaged with a pair of fathers, V-neck deep, lashes going.

All the beastly children scramble to their feet and dance.

It is easy.

For the price of twenty bucks an hour he humiliates himself. Is it a worthy punishment? He cannot judge. He feels trapped inside a mascot suit of himself, burning his gaze into her, willing her to look his way, and when she finally does, he pratfalls out of his collapsible hair. She claps aimlessly, as if nothing, as if she's not sure where she is. How could he expect to walk into a life and attempt to make sense of it? Amazing, the truths we tell ourselves. He could be anybody.

Ask yourself, he has wanted to shout at the hospital social worker assigned to Una's case. Has it all turned out how you wanted? White shoes and Mylar balloons? A revolving door of exhausted, helpless parents, a cubicle collaged with posters—Call Our Hotline. Choose Organic. Screen your Newborn Today! During one of their recent arguments Meredith had wailed, *are you made of stone*, and even though the question was rhetorical it gnawed at him. Each time he held Una or kissed her and she did not kiss him back, did not smile or make eye contact or coo he wondered why, if the love of a child was supposed to be automatic and unconditional and

complete, did he feel hollow, the weight of her needs, the fragility of each breath yes, but a persistent missing in her heart?

“Don’t take any wooden nickels.” Max yanks a wad of funny money from between Jonah’s teeth.

“Any old idiot can do that!” Jonah hollers, so Max has the kid sneeze a booger stream of coins. Coins spill from the audience’s ears, noses; they tumble out sucked-on sleeves. Someone yells: “That’s magic!” Again, he catches the boy seeking out his mother, now installed at the bar behind the pool table, wiping something from her jeans, and feels sorry for him.

“But can any old idiot do this?”

Max masters the interlocking metal rings, the disappearing card trick. Jonah Holloman stays glued to his side, does not share or take turns. There is a singularity to his focus that Max almost admires, as if they are the only two in the room. The kid is a monster, no question. Children can be vicious. But he is a child, first and foremost. It is his birthday. His mother pumps her fist, hooting now like she’s at a pep rally. Tears run astray down her cheeks.

The room goes silent.

“For my next trick,” Max says, scanning the basement. Boys are wrestling over the toy handcuffs; girls have broken into his magic deck of Crazy Eights. Jonah’s twin siblings suck lollipops in the corner, looking skinny

and bored. One girl is hunched on the arm of the couch plucking auburn hairs from her head, running each strand like floss between her teeth. Above her swings the ravaged cavity of a harlequin piñata.

“You,” Max says, pointing.

“You yourself.”

The girl juts out her chin.

“Just what I need,” Max says. “Help me.”

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